

## **Behind the Cycle of Violence, Beyond Abuse History: A Brief Report on the Association of Parental Attachment to Physical Child Abuse Potential.**

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### **Abstract:**

Although the concept of a cycle of violence presumes that the transmission of violence is expressed directly across generations, the role of the overall quality of the parent-child relationship may ultimately be more influential in later parenting behavior. This study investigated whether mothers' poorer attachment to their parents was associated with their current increased child abuse potential and dysfunctional disciplinary style independent of a personal history of child abuse. A sample of 73 at-risk mothers raising children with behavior problems reported on their parental attachment, abuse potential, dysfunctional parenting style, and personal abuse history. An at-risk sample, rather than a sample of identified abuse victims or perpetrators, was studied to better examine the potential continuity or discontinuity from history of abuse to current abuse risk, allowing consideration of those who may break the cycle versus those who potentially initiate abuse in the absence of a personal history. Findings indicate that poor attachment significantly predicted both dysfunctional parenting practices and elevated child abuse potential, controlling for personal child abuse history. Such results highlight the importance of the overall quality of the relationship between the parent and child in potentially shaping future abuse risk. Findings are discussed in terms of continuity or discontinuity in the cycle of violence and future directions for research on attachment in relation to the development of later child abuse risk.

**Keywords:** child abuse | child abuse potential | cycle of violence | parent-child relationship | parental attachment | child maltreatment | physical abuse | family support

### **Article:**

One of the most frequently cited factors in fueling a parent's likelihood to physically abuse a child derives from the parent's personal childhood history of abuse and harsh discipline. For decades, there was widespread acceptance of the classic phenomenon referred to as the

intergenerational transmission of violence hypothesis (Curtis, 1963; Oliver & Taylor, 1971; Silver, Dublin, & Lourie, 1969), predicated on social learning theories (Bandura, 1973). Although this belief in an intergenerational transmission of abuse permeates lay and professional circles alike, researchers have long cautioned of insufficient support for an immutable cycle of violence claim (e.g., Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Widom, 1989). Physical abuse as a child and becoming physically abusive as a parent is no longer accepted as a necessary or sufficient condition (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005) given that the majority of parents with abusive and harsh discipline histories do not invariably become abusive or harsh disciplinarians (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988).

Certainly, empirical research does support a connection between abusive and harsh discipline as a child and parental child abuse risk (e.g., Bert, Guner, & Lanzi, 2009; Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001; Coohey & Braun, 1997; Craig & Sprang, 2007; Margolin, Gordis, Medina, & Oliver, 2003), particularly for those who were most severely abused (Pears & Capaldi, 2001). What is often most perplexing is when statistics reveal that the majority of abusive parents do not have a personal history of an abusive childhood (Gelles, 1987); such parents could thus be considered "Initiators" of abuse (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2009, p. 112). Alternatively, current personal psychological difficulties and limited resources are evident in the minority of abused parents who maintain the cycle (those demonstrating continuity), but similar patterns are apparent in the majority of abused parents who break the cycle (those evidencing discontinuity; Dixon et al., 2009). Hence, although a personal history of abuse may exacerbate a parent's physical child abuse risk, this historical component does not account for the variability in paths that lead either away from or toward abuse of one's own child.

Other qualities of the family of origin, apart from abuse history, may play a role in increasing physical child abuse risk. The role of family support received as a child appears to be a factor predictive of abuse risk (Black et al., 2001; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). One study did observe intergenerational discontinuity in the cycle of violence if the parent had experienced a supportive relationship as a child with some adult, although not specifically the parent (Egeland et al., 1988); other studies have found that perceived childhood support did not differentiate those who physically abuse their children (Caliso & Milner, 1994). Addressing some methodological issues of earlier studies, an analysis of continuity versus discontinuity suggested that abuse victims' poor quality attachment with one's parents was associated with abuse of one's children (Zuravin, McMillen, DePanfilis, & Risley-Curtiss, 1996).

However, much of the literature has relied on reviewing the childhood background of confirmed perpetrators and/or victims of physical abuse that affords insight into only the restricted group of parents reported to protective services, despite the fact that most maltreatment is undetected or

unreported (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). To prevent child abuse, examining at-risk and low-risk parents can be useful (Graziano, 1994), particularly because such parents may represent some of those individuals who may be initiators of abuse in the absence of a personal history of child abuse. Prediction of physical child abuse risk in nonperpetrator samples typically involves an estimation of the likelihood that a parent will become abusive, labeled child abuse potential (Milner, 1986, 1994). Child abuse potential incorporates interpersonal and intrapersonal difficulties, as well as inflexible attitudes regarding children observed in parents who physically abuse their children (Milner, 1986). Consistent with research described earlier on those with an abuse history, who then become identified perpetrators of abuse (Zuravin et al., 1996), perceived attachment to one's parents could also be associated with child abuse risk in low or at-risk parents, wherein a poor quality relationship could increase the likelihood that they would later become abusive.

Moreover, violence is not the only aspect of one's parenting experience presumed to be transmitted intergenerationally. Parenting varies with regard to the extent of parental control, with parenting styles that are authoritarian or permissive considered dysfunctional parenting approaches (Baumrind, 1966, 1996). Child abuse potential is associated with observational indices of authoritarian parenting (Haskett, Scott, & Fann, 1995), positively associated with coercive parenting approaches, and negatively associated with sensitive and consistent parenting in a community sample of parents (Margolin et al., 2003). Additionally, dysfunctional disciplinary styles like authoritarian and permissive approaches appear particularly likely to demonstrate intergenerational continuity (Campbell & Gilmore, 2007). Given the connection between abuse potential and dysfunctional parenting style (e.g., Rodriguez, 2010), such dysfunctional approaches may also be more likely to emerge in those who report poor attachment to their own parents.

This study therefore examined whether a mother's attachment to her own parents related to her child abuse potential and dysfunctional disciplinary style in an at-risk sample. In particular, the study evaluated whether a mother's personal attachment to her parents was related to physical child abuse potential and dysfunctional disciplinary style beyond what is attributable to her personal reported history of child abuse. An at-risk sample of mothers raising children with behavior problems was studied, given that children with behavior problems typically have frequent discipline encounters, which amplifies parents' child abuse risk (Wolfe, 1999), and given that these parents more likely demonstrate dysfunctional parenting styles (Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993; Prinzie, Onghena, & Hellinckx, 2007). Additionally, rather than considering only abuse victims (e.g., Zuravin et al., 1996) or restricting the sample to current perpetrators of abuse, an at-risk sample allowed us to compare the attachment of those without a

history of abuse but evidencing high abuse potential (possible "Initiators"), as well as those with low abuse potential but with a personal history of abuse (possible "Cycle Breakers").

## METHODS

### Participants

The sample involved mothers drawn from a study of cognitive factors predicting child abuse risk (McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008) in maternal caregivers of children between 5 and 12 years old, who were receiving therapy for behavior problems. A total of 73 primary maternal caregivers participated in the study, with 65.8% identifying themselves as the biological mother, 23.3% as an other relative (e.g., grandmother), 9.6% as an adoptive parent, and 1.4% as a stepmother. For ease of description, all participants will be referred to as "mothers." Mothers' mean age was 40.71 (SD = 10.78). The mean number of children in the home was three (SD = 1.5). The range of ages for the identified child with problem behavior was 5 to 12 years old, with a mean age of 9.67 years (SD = 1.72), with 53 boys (72.6%) and 20 girls. With regard to race/ethnicity, 82.2% of mothers identified as White, 12.3% as Hispanic, 2.7% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.4% as Black/African American, and 1.4% as Asian. Most caregivers reported living with a spouse/partner: 27.4% indicated that they were single parents, with an estimated annual family income average of more than \$41,000, and the majority (82.2%) indicated that they graduated high school.

### Measures

The Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI; Milner, 1986) contains 160 items designed to screen for physical child abuse risk, with each statement requiring agreement or disagreement from the respondent. The measure assesses rigidity and intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics that have been identified in those substantiated for physical abuse. The Abuse Scale extracts only 77 items, with the remaining questions serving as experimental scales or measures of distortion biases. Higher scores on the Abuse Scale reflect greater child abuse potential. Previous research has established high internal consistency for the Abuse Scale (Milner, 1986), with split-half reliability ranging from .96 (for control groups) to .98 (for abuse samples), and Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficients ranging from .92 (for control samples) to

.95 (for abuse groups). Research has also reported the CAPI scores correctly identified 89.2% of confirmed child abusers and 99% of controls (Milner, 1994).

The Parenting Scale (Arnold et al., 1993) describes 30 typical parent-child conflicts to assess parents' dysfunctional disciplinary style. Respondents are asked to choose their usual responses to conflict situations on a 7-point scale, with opposing parent reactions presented as end points on each item. The Parenting Scale yields a total score representing overall dysfunctional disciplinary style that includes three response styles: (1) Overreactivity (a harsh, angry discipline style), (2) Laxness (a permissive approach to parenting), and (3) Verbosity (in which parents rely on verbal persuasion even when ineffective). Given that overall dysfunctional parenting style is associated with behavior problems in children (Prinz et al., 2007), this study focused on the Parenting Scale total score. Scores are generated by averaging across all items, with higher scores reflective of more dysfunctional parenting approaches. Internal consistency has been reported as .84 (Arnold et al., 1993), comparable to coefficients reported in a more recent normative study (Collett, Gimpel, Greenson, & Gunderson, 2001).

The Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1987) is a 55-item measure intended to assess perceptions of parental availability and support using a 5-point Likert scale. A total score captures their overall view of their personal attachment to their parents, using dimensions that capture the nature of the relationship on three subscales: (1) Affective Quality of Attachment, (2) Parental Fostering of Autonomy, and (3) Parental Support. Higher PAQ scores indicate greater sense of attachment to parents. The total score demonstrates high internal consistency for both men (.93) and women (.95; Kenny, 1987).

A personal Abuse History Index was derived from two unscored items extracted from the CAPI that do not contribute to the Abuse Scale score. Although the CAPI gauges attitudes and personal characteristics identified in abusive parents, the two items regarding perceived history of abuse ("I was abused as a child" and "As a child, I was knocked around by my parents") are not, in fact, included in the CAPI Abuse Scale. Consequently, these items were selected from the CAPI and were combined to form an index of perceived history of abuse, ranging from 0 (no abuse) to 2 (affirmative responses on both).

## Procedures

Approval for this study was obtained by the university's institutional review board, and informed consent was acquired from participants. Participants were recruited by staff and flyers distributed at community mental health agencies and a school district. Interested participants contacted the researchers, with the behavior disorder diagnosis confirmed by the child's therapist (see McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008 for further details). Data was collected in an in-home session during which all information from mothers was gathered anonymously on a laptop computer. Each mother was compensated \$20.00 for participation in the larger study.

## RESULTS

A series of *t* tests were initially performed to determine whether predictor and outcome measures differed relative to demographic characteristics to evaluate the need for statistical controls. No significant differences in outcome variables were identified for high school graduate participants or for those with single-parent status (all *t* tests with  $p > .05$ ), with the exception that CAPI Abuse Scale score means were significantly higher ( $t = 2.46, p \leq .05$ ) for single mothers ( $M = 198.6, SD = 95.8$ ) than for married mothers ( $M = 135.21, SD = 99.10$ ). Maternal age negatively correlated with Abuse History Index ( $r = 2.26, p \leq .05$ ), indicating that younger parents were more likely to report a history of abuse. Additionally, annual family income was negatively correlated with CAPI Abuse Scale scores ( $r = 2.34, p \leq .01$ ), suggesting that parents of lower income evidenced greater abuse risk. PAQ total scores were also correlated with age ( $r = .23, p \leq .05$ ) and estimated income ( $r = .29, p \leq .05$ ).

Initial examination of the correlations (Table 1) indicated that the PAQ total score was negatively correlated with Parenting Scale Total, CAPI Abuse Scale, and Abuse History Index, suggesting that lower sense of parental attachment on the PAQ is associated with greater abuse potential and dysfunctional parenting, as well as a perceived personal abuse history. Greater reported abuse history was not significantly correlated with child abuse potential scores or overall dysfunctional parenting style. Of potential interest to the reader, the pattern of correlations between the PAQ subscales and outcome measures generally indicated that Parenting Scale total and CAPI Abuse Scale scores were significantly negatively correlated with PAQ Affective Quality and PAQ Independence, with correlations ranging from 2.32 to 2.37 ( $ps \leq .01$ ) but unrelated to PAQ Source of Support; Abuse History Index was significantly negatively correlated with PAQ Affective Quality ( $r = -.36, p \leq .01$ ) and PAQ Source of Support ( $r = -.33, p \leq .01$ ) but not PAQ independence.

To examine more closely attachment among different subgroups of parents, the sample was divided into four subgroups by those who attained clinically elevated CAPI Abuse Scale scores (i.e., above 166 as indicated in the manual; Milner, 1986), as well as divided by perceived abuse history (no reported history vs. those endorsing either one or both items on the Abuse History Index). Based on the Abuse History Index, 58.9% reported no history of abuse; 24.7% endorsed one item; and 16.4% affirmed both items. Those reporting no abuse history and low CAPI Abuse Scale scores could be construed as potential "Maintain Low-Risk" mothers ( $n = 28$ ); those with high CAPI Abuse Scale scores and a personal history of abuse could be considered potential "Maintain High-Risk" mothers ( $n = 16$ ); those with a personal history of abuse but with low CAPI Abuse Scale scores could represent potential "Cycle Breakers" ( $n = 14$ ); and those with no personal history of abuse but with elevated CAPI Abuse Scale scores could be potential "Initiators" ( $n = 15$ ). A one-way analysis of variance of mean PAQ Total scores indicated a significant difference across groups,  $F(3, 69) = 4.76, p \leq .01$ . Mothers in the "Maintain Low-Risk" group reported better attachment ( $M = 188.67, SD = 37.87$ ) than the other three groups, in which "Initiators" attained attachment scores ( $M = 172.20, SD = 37.44$ ) comparable to those in the "Cycle Breakers" group ( $M = 174.78, SD = 25.07$ ); and the "Maintain High-Risk" mothers obtained the significantly lowest attachment scores ( $M = 145.69, SD = 40.58$ ).

Hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to determine whether parental attachment accounted for variance in the dependent variables, CAPI Abuse Scale scores and Parenting Scale Total scores, beyond what might be accounted for by personal abuse history. Given some of the significant demographic findings, covariates were included in the regression analyses to determine if the predictor variables accounted for variance in abuse potential and dysfunctional disciplinary style beyond that attributable to such demographic factors. The first block of the regression analyses entered demographic covariates (maternal age, living with partner, annual income, and education level), followed by abuse history, and a final block with PAQ total scores. Initially predicting CAPI Abuse Scale, this regression resulted in an  $R^2 = .22, F(6, 66) = 3.12, p \leq .01$ . However, of the background factors considered, annual income emerged as the only likely needed covariate and, thus, was retained in further analyses. A subsequent regression controlling only for income indicated that Abuse History did not significantly predict CAPI Abuse Scale scores, explaining only 2.4% unique variance in CAPI Abuse Scale scores. Thus, only PAQ Total Score was retained in the final, most parsimonious model, controlling for income, resulting in  $R^2 = .18, F(2, 70) = 7.72, p \leq .001$  (Table 2).

In the regression analyses to predict Parenting Scale Total scores, the contributions of background factors, Abuse History Index, and PAQ Total Score factors were similarly entered as described earlier, resulting in an  $R^2 = .15, F(5, 67) = 2.30, p = .05$ . However, demographic variables did not significantly predict the dependent variable, nor did Abuse History (when

combined, they explained about 10% of the variance and independently without demographic controls, Abuse History accounted for less than 4% of variance in Parenting Scale Total scores). Therefore, when controlling Abuse History Index, PAQ Total scores significantly predicted Parenting Scale Total scores, resulting in an  $R^2 = .11$ ,  $F(2, 70) = 4.15$ ,  $p \leq .05$  (see Table 2).

## DISCUSSION

Although the cycle of violence theory implicates the paramount role of the experience of abuse as a critical historical component in exacerbating child abuse risk, the role of other qualities of the family of origin remains unclear, particularly with regard to how abuse behavior arises in the absence of a parent's personal history of abuse. With an at-risk sample, this study examined whether current child abuse potential, as well as dysfunctional parenting style, were associated with mothers' reported attachment to their own parents rather than attributable to a perceived abuse history. Self-reported attachment and abuse potential were assessed in 73 mothers of children with diagnosed behavioral problems to determine whether attachment predicted current abuse risk and parenting practices beyond a reported history of personal child abuse.

These findings supported that mothers' poorer attachment to their parents was associated with greater physical abuse potential and dysfunctional disciplinary style. Similarly, mothers reporting poorer attachment were also more likely to report a personal history of childhood abuse. Contrary to dated views suggesting an immutable cycle of violence, a personal abuse history was not significantly associated with either child abuse potential or dysfunctional disciplinary style. Most importantly, regression analyses confirmed that attachment to one's parents significantly predicted child abuse potential and dysfunctional disciplinary style independent of personal abuse history. Furthermore, an examination of those with no personal history of abuse but with high child abuse risk and those who might represent potential "Initiators" of the cycle of violence, evidenced poor attachment comparable with those reporting an abuse history but with low abuse risk (potential "Cycle Breakers"). Poorest attachment was evident in those with both a personal history of abuse and high abuse risk, representing those mothers who appear most likely to maintain the cycle of violence, consistent with earlier research on poor attachment quality in perpetrators of abuse (Zuravin et al., 1996).

Taken together, these findings present an opportunity to explain the heterogeneity of paths leading to and from abuse, the continuity or discontinuity in the cycle of violence (cf. Dixon et al., 2009; Egeland et al., 1988). As noted earlier, childhood experiences of abuse are not



sufficient predictors of later abuse risk, nor even of later dysfunctional parenting; yet abuse history is often implicated as a significant contributor to later parenting (Caliso & Milner, 1992; Craig & Sprang, 2007; de Paúl & Domenech, 2000). However, the current findings suggest that the relationship quality with one's parent—not solely because such a relationship was characterized as abusive—predicted later abuse risk and parenting beliefs and practices. The finding that abuse risk and dysfunctional parenting style are not attributable to abuse history should not be interpreted as such experiences having no impact on abuse risk but rather that the past occurrence of abuse could be symptomatic of a broader, poor parent-child relationship. Considering the impact of the overall parent-child relationship allows for a clearer understanding of how these historical events may exert a lifelong influence on later parenting practices.

Within the attachment literature, poor attachment is widely accepted as associated with a host of intrapersonal and interpersonal difficulties (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Most notably, individuals with poor attachment histories have been categorized as more emotionally dysregulated, ineffective at managing negative emotions, and less likely to perceive others as reliable (Cloitre, Stovall-McClough, Zorbas, & Charuvastra, 2008). One can imagine how a mother, struggling to regulate her own emotional fluctuations and those of her child, might feel as though she has no one to turn to for assistance and thus turn to dysfunctional and maladaptive parenting strategies as a means of quickly controlling the situation. Moreover, unlike abuse which represents distinct instances of severe maladaptive parenting, the attachment literature underscores that parents' attachment styles would better predict later parenting behaviors given that the parent-child bond forms the basis of their understanding of past, current, and future relations such that this fundamental pattern of relating to others resonates into adulthood (Bowlby, 1969, 1977; Glachan & Murray, 1997).

Interpretations for this study are limited by the sample size, sample characteristics, and measurement issues. Specifically, the sample involved an at-risk sample of primarily White mothers. Although demographic features largely did not affect the main findings, future investigations should focus recruitment efforts toward larger samples that are more representative of diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the overrepresentation of mothers within the abuse literature is unfortunately reflected in this study, highlighting the continued need for research with fathers. In addition, given that this study included mothers of children with behavioral problems, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which these findings are replicable in other at-risk populations (e.g., teen parents, mental health populations).

With regard to methodological issues, the purpose of the Abuse History Index was to determine whether abuse occurred. Two items were deemed sufficient; however, examining whether current findings are observed using a more comprehensive measure of personal abuse, including abuse severity, should be considered for future investigations. Moreover, the self-reported perception of abuse history may serve to underestimate actual abuse history, leading to potentially conservative estimates of the role of abuse history. The CAPI, intended to screen for abuse risk, evidences good classification rates for confirmed perpetrators versus control groups (Milner, 1994), but abuse risk does not equate to abusive behavior that would require protective services substantiation; thus, the potential Initiators and Cycle Breakers may not, in fact, evidence discontinuity. The CAPI also relies heavily on items pertaining to perceived intrapersonal difficulties, such as psychological distress and depression, aspects that are also related to adults' attachment to their parents (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2009). The connection between abuse potential scores and attachment may thus reflect this shared connection with intrapersonal distress, despite the fact that they do not share item content. However, the findings with abuse potential and attachment were mirrored by those with dysfunctional disciplinary style, a measure that does not reflect intrapersonal distress or depression. Theoretically, the path may be that poor attachment leads to psychological difficulties, which ultimately increase risk. Future research should consider such paths, determining how historical factors like attachment quality contribute to, or combine with, a parent's current psychological difficulties and resource limitations, contemporary factors previously implicated in the continuity and discontinuity in child abuse risk (Dixon et al., 2009).

It is not uncommon to attempt to explain current behavior as resulting from past behavior. Similarly, the intergenerational transmission of abuse hypothesis implicates parents' personal experiences of abuse as one explanation for parents' current discipline style and abuse risk. Despite researchers' best efforts to diffuse support for this oversimplified explanation for a phenomenon widely accepted to be complex and multidetermined, the belief that childhood abuse ultimately leads to future abuse persists in some circles. However, findings from this study imply that a mother's overall attachment to her own parents, rather than abuse history per se, was not only associated with abuse risk but was also associated with dysfunctional discipline style as well. Poor attachment to one's parent can have pervasive effects, including, but not limited to, abusive parenting. Problematic attachment as a child may, in part, explain why those without a history of abuse become "Initiators" of abuse, and alternatively, why those who perceive a positive attachment despite abuse history may grow up and break the cycle of violence.

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